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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000644

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SUBJECT: (U) KURDISH POLITICIAN MAHMUD OTHMAN: THE INSIDER
INDEPENDENT

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S.
Ford for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary: In the first of a series of in-depth studies of the various Kurdish parties that will operate in the new Council of Representatives (COR), this cable examines the history and the evolution of one of the most powerful Kurdish independents in Iraqi politics. Dr. Mahmud Othman's long association with both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) allows for better insight into the motivations of both parties. Othman also bears watching since - as a man who theoretically has nothing to lose in the high-stakes political game in Iraq - he would feel less pressured by either the U.S. or the Kurdish leadership to refrain from staking out hardline - but potentially influential - positions on delicate issues such as the status of Kirkuk and the question of Kurdish independence. End Summary.

(U) The Barzani Family Physician

12. (U) Over the course of five meetings during February 2006, Kurdish independent and government negotiation working group member Dr. Mahmud Othman told PolOffs that his connection with the Barzani clan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) began in 1953 when he was in the fourth grade, in as-Sulymaniyah. He rose through the ranks and eventually was appointed a member of the KDP Politburo in 1964. (COMMENT: Othman's Transitional National Assembly (TNA) badge form lists his year of birth as 1943, which would have made him 21 years old when he became a Politburo member. END COMMENT.) At some point after this, Othman traveled to Baghdad to begin six years of training in medical college, then an additional two years working first as a civilian medical doctor for a year and then as a military medic. His impressions of his time in Baghdad during those years appears idealized: he recalls never bothering about sectarian differences, and claimed that while he had kept up sporadic contact with his colleagues in medical school, he had never cared until three years ago (2003) whether they were Sunni Arab or Shia or Kurdish.

13. (U) As a Politburo member and newly minted medical doctor, Othman became close with KDP founder Mullah Mustafa Barzani and acted as the KDP President's personal physician, translator, and consultant. It was then that he came to know Mullah Mustafa's sons Idris and Masud Barzani. (COMMENT: Idris and Masud were half-brothers; Idris was the

elder by two years. Masud's mother was Mullah Mustafa's third wife, and a member of the Zebari clan, the Barzanis' traditional rivals. END COMMENT.) Mullah Mustafa trusted Othman enough to include him in the Kurdish bloc that settled the 1970 ceasefire between Kurdistan and Baghdad; Othman personally negotiated some details with Saddam Hussein. At this point, Othman was considered by many to be second only to Mullah Mustafa in the KDP.

(U) The Split From the Barzanis

¶4. (C) The ceasefire ended with another conflict between Kurdistan and Baghdad from 1974-1975. With the Kurds' defeat, the KDP leadership fled Iraq in ¶1975. While in exile, Othman and other KDP members split from Mullah Mustafa. Othman claimed the split occurred because he refused to go to Iran with the others and disagreed with other decisions by the KDP leadership. After Mullah Mustafa's death, the KDP leadership that remained wanted Masud Barzani to lead, said Othman. Idris Barzani opted to step aside in favor of his younger half-brother, but remained very close to Masud until his death in ¶1987. In 1976, Othman founded an independent socialist party that was more closely aligned with Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) than the KDP. Othman's independent party never really challenged either the KDP or the PUK, and mostly dissolved as a result of the 1992 election in Kurdistan where the KDP and PUK assumed the vast majority of seats in the Kurdish autonomous region

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of northern Iraq.

¶5. (C) Othman retreated to London and became a senior Kurdish politician, respected more within the Kurdish community for his past association with Mullah Mustafa than his current political importance. Othman has remained close to Mullah Mustafa's son and heir to the KDP leadership, Masud Barzani, and to Talabani. He still identifies as an independent, however, and told PolOffs that his utter disregard for political office allowed him to speak frankly on any issue. He won a seat in the TNA and the new Council of Representatives (COR) under his Kurdistan National Struggle Organization party, which is nominally a part of the main Kurdistan Alliance.

¶6. (C) Even as an independent, Othman is still trusted to some extent by both Barzani and Talabani, and they named him as the nominal lead on the current Kurdish negotiating team, working on national government formation talks for the first permanent Iraqi Government since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The other six members are equally divided between the KDP and the PUK: KDP leaders Rowsh Shaways, Hoshiyar Zebari, and Azad Berwari; PUK leaders Barham Saleh, Fuad Masum, and Latif Rashid. (COMMENT: Both Berwari and Rashid are also additions from last year's negotiating team on forming the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG). END COMMENT.)

(U) Views on the KDP-PUK Conflict

¶7. (C) Othman expressed his disappointment with how disagreements between Barzani and Talabani led to the death of so many Kurds in the 1990s. "If you remove the KDP and the PUK banner from their

manifests," said Othman, "both programs look exactly the same!" According to Othman, the PUK and the KDP nearly split again during the intra-Kurd negotiations on the merger between the KDP-dominated Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil and the PUK-led KRG in Sulaymaniyah. After several days of negotiations, Barzani on January 6 2006 threatened Talabani that if no agreement were made, Barzani would tell the Kurdistan Regional Assembly and the Americans that the Kurdish split was Talabani's fault. Talabani then conceded because he assessed that splitting the Kurdish Alliance would weaken Kurdish influence in Baghdad and undermine the progress the Kurds have made on key issues such as federalism and Kirkuk. Despite this tension, Othman vehemently denied that Barzani and the KDP would ever maneuver against Talabani. (COMMENT: This last statement was in response to PolOff's query on rumors that Barzani would refuse to support Talabani for President if the Shia Coalition had nominated SCIRI's Adil Abd al-Mahdi for Prime Minister. According to some Kurdish insiders, Barzani fears that he gave Talabani and the PUK too much national prominence, and was concerned that the closeness between Abd al-Mahdi and Talabani would give the latter too much power if the former had become Prime Minister. END COMMENT.)

18. (C) While the superficial delay of waiting for the PUK to nominate a Deputy Prime Minister for the combined KRG has been resolved by the nomination of former KRG-Sulaymaniyah Prime Minister Omar Fattah, Othman claimed deeper splits remained between the two parties. It was not yet clear that the PUK nominee for Deputy President (Kosrat Rasul Ali) would accept this post, and the Barzanis were uncomfortable with the choice anyway. (COMMENT: Unlike the Barzanis, Talabani does not have as tight a control over his PUK; in some ways, Talabani's party is run more like a democracy than the KDP. The fact remains, however, that Talabani narrowly avoided a coup d'etat by his PUK Politburo senior members, and still maintains only a tenuous control over them. END COMMENT.) Othman claimed that Barzani preferred Nowshirwan Mustafa, the PUK's second in command to Talabani, to be Deputy President. Barzani fears Mustafa more, stated Othman, and wanted him closer at hand in Erbil. Mustafa, on the other hand, has always been against the KRG merger and has made it clear he would never

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agree to move to Erbil as Barzani's deputy.

(U) Next Steps

19. (C) Othman stated his determination to pressure the Iraqi Government to enforce the mandates of TAL Article 58 and its constitutional equivalents. As for the prospects of the various Kurdish leaders in the next government, Othman speculated that Fuad Masum would remain a parliamentary member or perhaps even lead the COR. When pressed, Othman stated that he declined to lead the TNA or the COR because he knew he would not implement KDP or PUK policy. As for Shaways and Barham Saleh, Othman said with confidence that either could fill the Deputy Prime Minister slot, but while Shaways would be adequate, Saleh is the preferred choice because he would be more "active."

(U) Comment

¶10. (C) Othman has always been unafraid to stake out his own positions on various issues. During the past month, Othman has been blunt about his own preferences (openly supporting Fadhila Party's Nadim al-Jabiri, for example, despite's the Talabani preference for SCIRI's Adil Abd al-Mahdi or Barzani's wish for former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi). In doing so he has never jeopardized his position within the Kurdish Alliance. While we suspect that his ability to speak freely is at the sufferance of Barzani and Talabani, it nevertheless speaks to the level of respect according to him by both Barzani and Talabani for his proven credentials as a Kurdish nationalist. Othman bears watching since - as a man who theoretically has nothing to lose in the high-stakes political game in Iraq - he would feel less pressured by either the Americans or the Kurdish leadership to refrain from staking out extremist positions on delicate issues such as the status of Kirkuk and the question of Kurdish independence.

KHALILZAD